

CONSTABLE



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JOHN CONSTABLE

GEMS OF ART



Painted 1826

In the National Gallery

THE CORNFIELD, OR COUNTRY LANE

JOHN CONSTABLE

1776 ~ 1837

By
FRANK
RUTTER



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FOREWORD

UNLUCKY in many respects, John Constable was at least singularly fortunate in his biographer, his friend C. R. Leslie, himself a painter of some modest merit. Leslie's "Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, R.A.," first published in 1843, has deservedly become a classic and to this admirable work we are all of us indebted for most of what is known concerning the life of the painter. With the excellent good sense that distinguished him, Leslie, by generous quotations from the artist's letters, left Constable to a great extent to tell his own story, and his example is one that lesser mortals cannot fail to do wisely in following.

In this attempt, then, to give a brief outline of the life history of one of the greatest painters England ever produced, the present writer wishes to acknowledge his overwhelming indebtedness to the fascinating human document which was compiled by Leslie's industry, enthusiasm, and good taste. Since it was published, numbers of other books upon Constable have appeared, notably Lord Windsor's "John Constable, R.A.," and "Constable and his Influence on Landscape Painting," by C. J. Holmes; many of these have been consulted by the writer, and will be found acknowledged in the text, but Leslie's "Memoirs" remains now, as when first printed, the chief authority. Readers who are not yet acquainted with the book may like to know that a handy edition has been included in Messrs. Dent's "Everyman's Library," and this edition has the further attraction of containing a scholarly introduction by Sir Charles J. Holmes, Director of the National Gallery.

F.R.

JOHN CONSTABLE

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

JOHN CONSTABLE, the landscape painter, was born on the 11th of June, 1776, at East Bergholt, in Suffolk. He was the second son of Golding Constable, who was the grandson of a Yorkshire farmer who had moved from the north of England to the borders of Essex and Suffolk. Golding Constable had inherited a considerable property from an uncle, and, in addition to having two windmills at East Bergholt—where he made his home after his marriage in 1774 to Miss Ann Watts—he also owned a water-mill at Flatford and another at Dedham. His wife also had some money of her own, so that the parents of the artist, if not rich, were at least comfortably circumstanced. The marriage was eminently a happy one, and Mr. and Mrs. Golding Constable had three sons and three daughters.

John Constable, after appearing to be a weakly infant, grew into a strong and healthy child. At the age of seven he was put in a boarding school about fifteen miles from Bergholt, then he was moved to a school at Lavenham, which was ill-conducted by a love-sick headmaster and a bullying usher, and finally he was sent to the grammar school at Dedham where he became a favourite with the headmaster, the Rev. Dr. Grimwood. It

was the personality and character of the boy which won the regard of the master rather than any disposition for scholarship. Penmanship, we are told, was the one thing in which young John excelled, and he acquired some knowledge of Latin and a smattering of French, but already when he was sixteen he had become devoted to painting, and had formed a curious friendship with a plumber and glazier, one John Dunthorne, who lived in a little cottage near Mr. Constable's house and devoted all his leisure to painting landscapes from Nature. John Constable's first attempts at painting were made in the company of his friend Dunthorne in the open air and in the cottage. He had no studio in his home, but later on he hired a room in the village.

The father does not seem to^{*} have disapproved of his son's intimacy with this plumber-artist, but at that time he was decidedly unwilling that his son should become a professional artist. His parents had hoped that John might become a clergyman, but when it became clear that he had no vocation for this calling and was disinclined to make the necessary studies, it was decided to make him a miller. For about a year, therefore, John Constable was employed in his father's mills, and he is said to have performed his duties carefully and well. To look out for changes of the sky is one of the most important duties of a wind-miller, and with what searching scrutiny and loving care young Constable watched the heavens is revealed in his own comment on an early sketch, "Spring," afterwards engraved, of one of the mills in which he used to work.

"It may perhaps," wrote Constable, "give some idea of one of those bright and silvery days in the spring, when at noon

large garish clouds surcharged with hail or sleet sweep with their broad shadows the fields, woods, and hills, and by their depths enhance the value of the vivid greens and yellows so peculiar to the season. The *natural history*, if the expression may be used, of the skies, which are so particularly marked in the hail squalls at this time of the year, is this : The clouds accumulate in very large masses, and from their loftiness seem to move but slowly: immediately upon these large clouds appear numerous opaque patches, which are only small clouds passing rapidly before them, and consisting of isolated portions detached probably from the larger cloud. These floating much nearer the earth may perhaps fall in with a stronger current of wind, which, as well as their comparative lightness, causes them to move with greater rapidity, hence they are called by wind-millers and sailors, *messengers*, and always portend bad weather. They float midway in what may be termed the lanes of the clouds; and from being so situated, are almost uniformly in shadow, receiving a reflected light only, from the clear blue sky immediately above them. In passing over the bright parts of the clouds they appear as darks, but in passing over the shadowed parts they assume a grey, a pale, or a lurid hue."

No moment of the time spent by the young wind-miller in watching the sky was wasted, and the knowledge of clouds and weather which he thus acquired in his youth was afterwards of incalculable value to him as an artist. John Constable was now between eighteen and nineteen, and the turning point in his life was at hand. At Dedham resided the Dowager Lady Beaumont, mother of Sir George Beaumont, the famous amateur and collector, the friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and the pupil

of Richard Wilson. Sir George frequently visited his mother at Dedham, and Mrs. Constable, sympathizing with John's artistic yearnings, obtained for her son an introduction to the great connoisseur. Sir George was kind and encouraging to the young miller. He praised some pen-and-ink copies of engravings after Raphael's cartoons which Constable had made, he showed him his favourite picture by Claude—"The Annunciation," now in the National Gallery—and also lent him some of Girtin's water-colours, which he advised him to study as "examples of great breadth and truth." These pictures by Claude and Girtin were the first considerable works of art which Constable had seen, and he always regarded his first sight of them as an important epoch in his life.

Owing largely to the good opinion and influence of Sir George Beaumont, Constable was permitted in 1875 to go to London with a view to ascertaining there his chances of success as a painter. He was furnished with an introduction to Joseph Farington, R.A., now more famous as a diarist than as a painter, but then an artist of great influence in London who was spoken of as "the Dictator of the Royal Academy." Farington received Constable kindly, gave him considerable encouragement, and at an early date predicted that his style of landscape would eventually "form a distinct feature in the art." It is not true that Constable ever became Farington's pupil, as some have supposed, but he, no doubt, received many valuable hints from him, and particularly information regarding the practice of Richard Wilson, under whom Farington had studied. From Farington's "Diary" it is clear that a cordiality existed between him and Constable from their very first meeting, and it is noticeable how plainly even

the formal phrases of the "Diary" convey a suggestion that while a call from Turner was merely a duty endured, a call from Constable was always a pleasure enjoyed.

While in London, Constable made the acquaintance of John Thomas Smith, a draughtsman and engraver, who subsequently became Keeper of Prints at the British Museum, but is best remembered now as author of a "Life of Nollekens." Smith not only taught Constable something of the processes of etching, but also gave him some excellent advice, notably warning him not to invent figures for a landscape from his fancy :—

"You cannot remain an hour in any spot, however solitary, without the appearance of some living thing that will, in all probability accord better with the scene and time of day than will any invention of your own."

This advice was treasured and faithfully adhered to with the result that the figures in Constable's landscapes invariably appear natural and appropriate, such as he might have seen, and probably did see on the spot. For the next two years Constable divided his time between London and Bergholt, keeping up a correspondence with Smith when he was in the country, and these letters, preserved in Leslie's "Memoirs of the Life of John Constable," are our chief source of information as to the artist's occupations during this period. Smith at this time was publishing a series of etchings of picturesque cottages, and some of Constable's letters to him contained sketches of cottages. Probably these sketches were as good as anything Constable was doing at the time. He experimented with etching, he copied a battle painting, and he painted two small subject pictures, "The Chemist" and "Alchemist," inspired by Romeo's

FLATFORD MILL, ON THE RIVER STOUR

Painted 1817

In the National Gallery



account of an apothecary's shop. Leslie says these two paintings "have very little merit," and we may imagine that Constable in painting them thought he was doing what he ought, what might be popular, rather than what he himself wanted and was best fitted to paint. A temporary despondency regarding his painting, together with the breakdown of an old clerk who had been eighteen years with Mr. Golding Constable, caused the artist in 1797 to enter his father's counting-house. Exactly how long John Constable was engaged on this clerical work is not certainly known, but in 1799 he took up his brush again and never afterwards laid it aside.

In February 1799, probably by the advice and goodwill of Farington, he was admitted as a student to the Royal Academy Schools, and establishing himself in rooms at 23, Cecil Street, Strand, close to Somerset House which was then the headquarters of the Academy, he worked hard at both drawing from the antique and painting. He copied "a sweet little picture by Jacob Ruysdael," which somebody lent him, and two landscapes by Richard Wilson. In August he visited Ipswich and wrote to Smith, "It is a most delightful country for a painter. I fancy I see Gainsborough in every hedge and hollow tree." Constable was now finding his true vocation, and though the sketches made during his first visit to Ipswich are lost, his letters make it clear that he was painting from Nature each day and every day, "by all the daylight we have, and that is little enough." Of the work Constable did at the Royal Academy, almost the only thing that remains is a remarkably fine study in black and white chalk of a recumbent nude male figure, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington. The drawing and

modelling of this figure, and particularly of the legs, are so good that this study is unique among Constable's work; it shows that he must have worked most conscientiously and strenuously at the figure, though his heart was never really in the business, and his subsequent portraits and figure paintings were not nearly so satisfying. According to his own account Constable found it necessary "to fag at copying, some time yet, to acquire execution," but all the time he was in London he was secretly longing to be back in the country painting from Nature. In a letter to his old friend the plumber Dunthorne he says, "This fine weather almost makes me melancholy; it recalls so forcibly every scene we have visited and drawn together. I even love every stile and stump, and every lane in the village, so deep-rooted are early impressions."

In 1800 Constable spent some weeks in Helmingham Park, taking possession of an empty parsonage, and in a letter to the same correspondent he expresses his happiness at being "quite alone among the oaks and solitudes." Two of the drawings he did here came into the possession of C. R. Leslie, who says that "though slight and merely in black and white, they show that he at that time possessed a true sense of the beautiful in composition." From another letter to Dunthorne we learn that in the following year Constable moved to 50, Rathbone Place, where he rented three rooms, one of them with three windows providing him with a good light for painting. Modest enough about his own powers, Constable confidentially informs Dunthorne that he is disgusted with the "cold trumpery stuff" which passes as landscapes among some of his artist acquaintances, and he resolved to keep "more to himself" than he did formerly.

An artist before natural scenery, Constable seems to have become a moralist when contemplating the human figure. In 1802 he was absorbed by the anatomical lectures given at the Royal Academy Schools by a Mr. Brookes, but while he made many accurate and beautifully coloured anatomical drawings, these lectures roused the moral and religious feelings of the man rather than any artistic ambitions. Writing to Dunthorne he enthusiastically exclaims : "Excepting astronomy, and that I know little of, I believe no study is really so sublime, or goes more to carry the mind to the Divine Architect. Indeed, the whole machine which it has pleased God to form for the accommodation of the real man, the mind, during its probation in this vale of tears, is as wonderful as the contemplation of it is affecting. I see, however, many instances of the truth, and a melancholy truth it is, that a knowledge of the things created does not always lead to a veneration of the Creator. Many of the young men in this theatre are reprobates."

There are few passages in all Constable's letters which give a better indication than this of his deeply religious nature, and while on the subject it may be said at once that Constable's own record is singularly pure and stainless; his life contained no passages which a biographer would desire to omit or white-wash.

It was in this year, 1802, that Constable exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy, his picture being entitled simply "Landscape," but he had sent the year before and been rejected. In later years the artist told Leslie of having taken his rejected picture, a view of Flatford Mill, to the President of the Academy, Mr. Benjamin West, who consoled him

for his disappointment, saying, "Don't be disheartened young man, we shall hear of you again; you must have loved Nature very much before you could have painted this." West then took a piece of chalk and showed Constable how he might improve the chiaroscuro by some additional touches of light between the stems and branches of the trees, saying, "Always remember, sir, that light and shadow *never stand still*." Constable said this was the best lecture, because a practical one, on chiaroscuro he ever heard.

Meanwhile Constable, now in his twenty-sixth year, was no nearer earning a living by his brush than he had been at the start. The only "jobs" he appears to have secured as yet were to copy a portrait and to paint "a background to an ox." He was tempted to accept a position as drawing-master in a school which Dr. Fisher, rector of Langham and afterwards Bishop of Salisbury, procured for him; but, again, Benjamin West stood his friend and warned him that to accept it would be to give up all hopes of distinction as a painter. West not only gave this advice, but extricated the young artist from a difficulty by himself explaining to Dr. Fisher, in a manner that could not possibly give offence, why Constable ought to decline his well-intentioned offer.

In a letter to Dunthorne this same summer, Constable makes his now world-famed profession of faith: "For the last two years I have been running after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand. I have not endeavoured to represent Nature with the same elevation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performances look like the work of other men. I am come to a determination to make no idle

visits this summer, nor to give up my time to commonplace people. I shall return to Bergholt, where I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me. There is little or nothing in the exhibition worth looking up to. *There is room enough for a natural painter.* The great vice of the present day is *bravura*, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. Fashion always had, and will have, its day; but truth in all things only will last, and can only have just claims on posterity."

Beyond all question there was room for "a natural painter" in this age, when artificiality was the rage and the fashion, but could the natural painter ever hope to make a living? Unswayed by thoughts of ways and means Constable set about carrying out his theories in practice, and the first fruits of his renewed efforts were two landscapes and two "Studies from Nature" which he exhibited at the Academy in 1803. They appear to have attracted little notice, but Constable was not discouraged and writing to his friend Dunthorne he said confidentially: "The exhibition is a very indifferent one on the whole. In the landscape way most miserable. . . . There are, however, some good portraits. . . .

"I feel now, more than ever, a decided conviction that I shall sometime or other make some good pictures. Pictures that shall be valuable to posterity, if I reap not the benefit of them. This hope, added to the great delight I find in the art itself, buoys me up, and makes me pursue it with ardour.

"Panorama painting seems all the rage. There are four or five now exhibiting, and Mr. R—. is coming out with another, a view of Rome, which I have seen."

The great event of this year for Constable was a sea-trip he made, before the opening of the Academy, from London to Deal in the *Coutts*, an East Indiaman whose captain was a friend of Mr. Golding Constable. This voyage really gave Constable his first insight into the art of the marine painter, and he relates his experiences in a letter to Dunthorne :—

“I was near a month on board, and was much employed in making drawings of ships in all situations. I saw all sorts of weather. Some the most delightful, and some as melancholy. But such is the enviable state of a painter that he finds delight in every dress Nature can possibly assume . . .

“At Chatham I hired a boat to see the men-of-war. . . . I sketched the *Victory* in three views. She was the flower of the flock, a three decker of (some say) 112 guns. She looked very beautiful, fresh out of dock and newly painted. When I saw her they were bending the sails; which circumstances, added to a very fine evening, made a charming effect. . . . The worst part of the story is that I have lost all my drawings. The ship was such a scene of confusion, when I left her, that although I had done my drawings up very carefully, I left them behind. When I found, on landing, that I had left them, and saw the ship out of reach, I was ready to faint, I hope, however, I may see them again some time or other.”

Fortunately Constable did manage to recover about 130 of his marine drawings, and he made good use of his *Victory* studies three years later for his water-colour, “H.M.S. *Victory* in the Battle of Trafalgar, between Two French Ships of the Line,” which was exhibited in 1806. The *Victory* Constable knew intimately, and he was able to visualize its position in the

battle from a description given him by a Suffolk man who had been on Nelson's ship.

Between 1804 and 1807 we know little of Constable's doings because as yet biographers have discovered no letters to or from him covering this period. In 1804 he did not exhibit at the Academy and much of his time this year was occupied in painting an altar-piece for Brantham Church, near Bergholt, the subject being "Christ blessing little Children." I had a good opportunity of studying this large picture, in which the figures are life-size, when it was lent to the Constable Exhibition at the Leeds Art Gallery, and though it cannot be considered a great achievement, and is rather brown and dull in colour, I found that it had a certain tenderness in the conception and treatment which went some way towards neutralizing the defects for which it has been criticized. Sir C. J. Holmes has pronounced it to be "a feeble imitation of West's religious works," and no doubt Constable was influenced by Benjamin West in this painting, but the feeling is genuine and not mawkish. Leslie said of it, "The arrangement of the masses is good, but it has no other merit," yet as a matter of fact the arrangement of the figures, all standing except a child in the Saviour's arms, becomes a little monotonous, and I would rather say that its chief merit is its simplicity and its expression, fervent though weak, of piety and reverence.

Though essentially a religious man, Constable doubtless felt that he would never attain excellence in the painting of religious subjects, and only once again in his life did he attempt an altar-piece. This was four years later, in 1808, when he executed a single half-length figure of the Saviour blessing the bread and

THE HAY-WAIN

Painted 1821

In the National Gallery



wine for Nayland Church, which is within a short walk of East Bergholt. In this painting Constable shows more originality in his colour scheme, Leslie admitting that the broken purples and brownish yellows in the draperies are "very agreeable," and the effect of lamplight on the face is not unskilful; but the work is not impressive as a whole, and considering the localities of the two churches we shall not be far wrong in assuming that Constable knowingly went out of his own particular field of art chiefly in the endeavour to do a kindness and give pleasure to his neighbours.

More important than either of these altar-pieces was a journey to the Lake Country, which Constable made in 1806, on the advice of his maternal uncle, David Pike Watts, who defrayed his expenses for the tour. Some of the sketches made by the artist in Westmorland and Cumberland are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, and are considered to be among the very best of his water-colours. But though this journey furnished Constable with subjects for some small pictures subsequently exhibited, the grandiose scenery of the lakes did not appeal to him so strongly as the more homely scenes in his native Suffolk. Perhaps his innate modesty restrained him from attempting to depict the wild and terrible in Nature, but whatever the cause he left the lakes to Turner, and made his own name immortal by the interpretation of more placid scenes. Leslie declares that Constable confessed to him that "the solitude of mountains oppressed his spirits. His nature was peculiarly social and could not feel satisfied with scenery, however grand in itself, that did not abound in human associations. He required villages, churches, farmhouses,

and cottages; and I believe it was as much from natural temperament as from early impressions that his first love, in landscape, was also his latest love."

Some of the results of this excursion were shown at the Royal Academy, "A View in Westmorland," "Keswick Lake," and "Bow Fell" in 1807, and "Borrowdale," "A Scene in Cumberland," and "Windermere Lake" in 1808; but somehow neither then nor since have these landscapes ever attained a place in public favour ever approaching the artist's Suffolk and southern landscapes.

Meanwhile events were conspiring to seduce the painter from devoting himself solely to landscape painting. In 1806 he visited a family of bankers named Lloyd at Birmingham, painted several of their portraits and apparently gave satisfaction to the sitters. His own family, who knew nothing about art—except that the most famous landscape painter of his age, Richard Wilson, R.A., the "Father of British Landscape," nearly died of starvation—and were perfectly satisfied with the portraits of themselves which John had painted, were all inclined to push him towards the more remunerative branch of portraiture. A great sensation was caused in 1811 when Benjamin West's picture of "Christ healing the Sick" was sold for £3,000. Constable's mother saw it and thought her John's altar-piece at Brantham just as good and rather better. With the best intentions the good lady hastened to write to her son, saying, "In truth, my dear John, though in all human probability my head will be laid low long ere it comes to pass, yet with my present light, I can perceive no reason why you should not one day with diligence and attention be the performer of a picture

worth £3,000." Poor dear woman, how surprised she would have been had anyone told her that a hundred years later a collector would pay £100,000 for a *landscape*.

Worst of all, Constable fell in love, he wanted to marry, and to marry he required an income, not merely an allowance. In 1800 a little girl came to visit her grandfather, the Rev. Dr. Durand Rhudde, rector of East Bergholt and Brantham. Her name was Maria Bicknell, and her father, Charles Bicknell, was solicitor to the Admiralty and lived in Spring Gardens, London. Constable made little Miss Bicknell's acquaintance during her first visit to her grandfather, and saw a good deal of her during subsequent visits, but it was not till about 1810 apparently that he discovered he was in love with her and seriously entertained the idea to make her his wife. From the charming series of letters, preserved in Leslie's "Memoirs," which set forth the history of Constable's courtship and marriage, it would appear that he definitely proposed to Miss Bicknell some time in October, 1811. In the first letter of this series, dated November 2nd that year, Miss Bicknell, who was then visiting a friend in the country, writes : "I am very impatient, as you may imagine, to hear from Papa, on the subject so fraught with interest to us both; but was unwilling to delay writing to you, as you would be ignorant of the cause of such seeming inattention. . . . You know my sentiments; I shall be guided by my father in every respect. Should he acquiesce in my wishes, I shall be happier than I can express. If not, I shall have the consolation of reflecting that I am pleasing him, a charm that will in the end give the greatest satisfaction to my mind."

These are most proper sentiments, no doubt, for an early

nineteenth-century young lady, though they read strangely in the twentieth century. "Papa," according to his daughter, was both "reasonable and kind"; he bore the artist no personal ill-will and raised no objection to the match except "on the score of that necessary evil, money." But unfortunately a still more powerful force resolved to oppose the union tooth and nail. This was old Dr. Rhudde, who, it was known, intended to bequeath a large sum of money to his granddaughter Maria, and did not wish her to marry an impecunious artist. In the circumstances Miss Bicknell was disposed to abandon hopes and resign herself to nothing more than a friendship with the artist. "We should both of us be bad subjects for poverty, should we not?" she writes. "Even painting would go on badly; it could hardly survive in domestic worry."

When Constable, more courageous, assured her, "We have only to consider our union as an event that must happen, and we shall yet be happy," Maria primly replied: "You grieve and surprise me by continuing so sanguine on a subject altogether hopeless. I cannot endure that you should harbour expectations that must terminate in disappointment. I never can consent to act in opposition to the wishes of my father. How, then, can I continue a correspondence wholly disapproved of by him? . . . You must be certain that you cannot write without increasing feelings that must be entirely suppressed. You will, therefore, I am sure, see the impropriety of sending me any more letters."

This was in December, 1811, and Constable, persistent and certainly not easily discouraged, returned to the attack in the following spring, when he appears to have broken down her

self-denying ordinance, and a regular exchange of letters took place. In one, dated April, 1812, occurs the significant passage : "I am now engaged with portraits. Mr. Watts sat to me this morning, and seems pleased with what is going on. I am copying a picture for Lady Heathcote, her own portrait as Hebe." In other words, the great landscape artist was turning himself into a portrait-painting hack in the endeavour to improve his income. Also, he calls on the formidable Dr. Rhudde—"who was very courteous"—and Constable congratulates himself on this tactful advance, confessing that "though this may not better our cause, it cannot make it worse."

In May matters have so far improved that Constable writes to "My dearest Maria," and Miss Bicknell replies to "My dear John." During this month the artist's true friend, the Rev. John Fisher, afterwards Archdeacon Fisher, chaplain to his uncle, the Bishop of Salisbury, tries to persuade the artist to visit him and paint in the open air at Salisbury. But the slave of love in London actually boasts, "I am getting on with my picture for Lady Heathcote. Lady Louisa Manners has a wretched copy by Hoppner from Sir J. Reynolds, which she wishes me to repaint. . . . I am determined not to fritter away the summer, if I can help it."

So June comes and finds Constable still in London, set on money-making by portraiture. On the 10th he writes to Miss Bicknell that he has completed a portrait of Dr. Fisher, Bishop of Salisbury, "quite to their satisfaction"—that is of Dr. and Mrs. Fisher. "I am to make a duplicate of it for the palace at Exeter." In a letter dated June 15th the true Constable breaks

out with the cry : "I am making sad ravages of my time with the wretched portraits I mentioned to you. I am ungallant enough to allude entirely to the ladies' portraits. I see no end, if I stay, to my labours in Pall Mall."

And all this time Constable is "sighing for the country." At last, in the third week of June, he tears himself from London and gets back to East Bergholt. On July 22nd he writes : "I have been living a hermit-like life, though always with my pencil in my hand. . . . How much real delight have I had with the study of landscape this summer !" But even in the country circumstances conspire to seduce the artist from the peaceful pursuit of landscape painting. On September 6th he writes : "I am going to-morrow to stay a few days at General Rebow's, near Colchester, to paint his little girl, an only child, seven years old ; I believe I am to paint the general and his lady at some future time."

In November, 1812, a fire broke out at the house in Charlotte Street, where Constable was living. Fortunately, he lost nothing and only suffered "a temporary inconvenience," but his goodness of heart and courage at this time were displayed by his heroically re-entering the burning house and mounting through the smoke to the garret in order to rescue the fortune of a poor woman servant who, in her fright, had left all her money under her pillow.

This same month his mother, an exemplary parent, and yet utterly unable to understand the real genius of her son, again endeavours to push John further along the wrong road by writing : "You now so greatly excel in portraits that I hope you will pursue a path the most likely to bring you fame and

wealth, by which you can alone expect to obtain the object of your fondest wishes." His lady love was no more helpful. She expresses sorrow at seeing how "unsettled" John has become, and sententiously continues : "You will allow others, without half your abilities, to outstrip you in the race of fame, and then look back with sorrow on time neglected and opportunities lost, and perhaps blame me as the cause of all this woe. Exert yourself while it is yet in your power ; the path of duty is alone the path of happiness."

Though Constable had a good deal of ill-health, both in 1812 and 1813, he continued to "exert" himself, painting Nature because he loved her and portraits from a sense of duty. What little reputation he enjoyed at this time was as a landscape painter, and he continued to contribute landscapes to the Royal Academy exhibitions. His four small pictures there in 1812 included a "View of Salisbury" and a "Flatford Mill"; in 1813 he exhibited "Landscape : Boys Bathing" and "Landscape : Morning." In June, John Fisher wrote to him from Salisbury stating he had heard Constable's larger picture "spoken of here, by no inferior judge, as one of the best in the exhibition." Yet, in his frantic desire to get his finances into a marriageable condition, Constable lacked the courage to leave portraiture alone. At the end of June he was on the point of leaving London for Suffolk, but he writes : "I was, however, prevented by a call on me for portraits; for I assure you, my reputation in that way is much on the increase. One of them, a portrait of the Rev. George Bridgman, a brother of Lord Bradford, far excels any of my former attempts in that way, and is doing me a great deal of service. My price for a

HAMPSTEAD HEATH

Exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1830

In the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington



head is fifteen guineas; and I am tolerably expeditious when I can have fair play at my sitter. I have been much engaged for Lady Heathcote, who seems bent on serving me. My pictures of herself and her mother occupy either end of the large drawing-room in Grosvenor Square; they have magnificent frames, and make a great dash. She is to bring me a handsome boy at the Christmas holidays. . . . I am now leaving London for the only time in my life with my pockets full of money. I am entirely free from debt (not that my debts ever exceeded my usual annual income), and I have required no assistance from my father."

To appreciate the significance of these lines we should remember that the writer was now thirty-seven years of age, and the money in his pocket, "for the only time," was earned by portraits, not landscapes. In spite of the real sacrifices he was making, Constable's matrimonial suit made little progress. Mr. Bicknell did not dislike him personally, but he would not consent to any engagement so long as his wife's father disapproved of the match, fearing that if he did so Maria might lose her expected legacy from Dr. Rhudde. Early in 1814 Constable begs Miss Bicknell to keep up a weekly correspondence. This, she declares, is "totally impracticable," but she softens her refusal by saying, "I will write as often as I can."

From this year (1814) dates the beginning of a slight turn in Constable's fortunes. At the very moment when his relatives were expressing concern that he should still devote so much of his time to the production of unmarketable pictures, Constable sold two landscapes, a small picture exhibited at the British Gallery, to a Mr. Allnutt, and a larger painting of "A Lock"

to a Mr. James Carpenter. "He is a stranger to me, and bought it because he liked it." Mr. Allnutt also was a stranger, but having views of his own about the painting of skies, he foolishly employed Linnell to substitute another sky for that painted by Constable. He lived to lament his vandalism, and some years later the chastened connoisseur humbly admitted his error and approached Constable, who good-naturedly not only restored his own sky, but painted an entirely new picture of the same subject on a slightly smaller scale so that it might pair exactly with another painting hung in the same room. Mr. Allnutt subsequently related that when he wished to settle the account for the work Constable had done, the artist protested that he had no charge to make, but was himself under an obligation to his patron, saying "I had been the means of making a painter of him, by buying the first picture he ever sold to a stranger, which gave him so much encouragement, that he determined to pursue a profession in which his friends had great doubts of his success."

In 1814 Constable painted the picture of "Willy Lott's House," a small farmhouse on the river close to Flatford Mill, now hanging in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, and further sent two more landscapes, "Ploughing Scene in Suffolk" and "A Ferry," to the Royal Academy.

Encouraged by this small measure of success, Constable returned to his landscape studies with renewed zeal and increased power. With his landscapes proving saleable, John contemplates married bliss as within the bounds of an early possibility. He writes optimistically to his beloved Maria, who replies : "Indeed, my dear John, people cannot live now upon

£400 a year; it is a bad subject, therefore adieu to it." And the self-possessed young lady expresses mild surprise that John should stay in the country at this time and so miss the opportunity of seeing in London "our illustrious visitors," the Emperor Alexander and the King of Prussia. Alas, John Constable was no courtier, and had eyes for no monarch but King Sol! Fortunately for posterity, the artist withstood the temptation to "see the sights" in London, and celebrated the victory of the allies over Napoleon in his own way—by remaining quietly in the country at East Bergholt all the summer and all the autumn, achieving, among other things, his first real masterpiece, painted entirely in the open air, the famous "Boat-building" (see illustration), which shows us a meadow at Flatford with a barge on the stocks, while beyond it the River Stour glitters in the still sunshine of a hot summer's day. "This picture," said Leslie, "is a proof that, in landscape, what painters call warm colours are not necessary to produce a warm effect. It has indeed no positive colour, and there is much of grey and green in it; but such is its atmospheric truth, that the tremulous vibration of the heated air near the ground seems visible." If Constable's mind was uneasy about his love affair at this time, no restlessness of his was reflected in his painting, and all who see this beautiful picture in the Victoria and Albert Museum will gladly admit that the work is the quintessence of serenity and repose. It was exhibited in the following year at the Royal Academy but, sad to relate, found no purchaser then or afterwards. This "perfect work," as Leslie calls it, remained in the possession of the artist to the end of his life.

Another great point, in Constable's estimation, was gained

in 1815, when Mr. Bicknell permitted him to be "a visitor in a friendly way" at Spring Gardens. As against this favour gained, however, was set a serious loss, that of his mother, who in May had a paralytic stroke which terminated fatally; and by a strange coincidence Mrs. Bicknell, Maria's mother, died a few days afterwards. The lovers consoled one another, and that summer Maria's letters were less "practical" and far more sympathetic. "How delightful this sweet rain will make those dear fields look, that I envy you the sight of," she writes in July. "How much you must enjoy painting in the open air, after Mr. Dawe's room." Dawe, by the way, was a man who earlier in the year had given Constable the "job" of painting a background in a large picture. Again, in September, she writes: "How charmed you must be with this long continuance of fine weather. . . . Nature and you must be greater friends than ever." The reader begins to have hopes that Maria, after all, is not ill-fitted to the honour which Constable proposes to do her.

This mild but, even so, new-found happiness of the pair was rudely disturbed in the following February, when old Dr. Rhudde discovered that Constable had been allowed to pay occasional visits to Spring Gardens, and wrote a violent letter to Mr. Bicknell. "Poor dear Papa, to have such a letter written to him!" wails his daughter. "I know not how it will end. Perhaps the storm may blow over; God only knows. We must be patient. I am sure your heart is too good not to feel for my father. He would wish to make us all happy if he could. Pray, do not come to town just yet." A week later, on February 13th, she writes: "The kind doctor says he 'considers me no longer

as his granddaughter,' and, from the knowledge I have of his character, I infer he means what he says. . . . Papa says, if we were to marry and live at Bergholt, he thinks the doctor would leave the place." The modern admirer of the artist can contemplate this prospect with equanimity, but to the Bicknells, and no doubt to Constable himself, this would have appeared to be a calamity. Constable, who had always disliked his visits being kept a secret, replies in a manly tone: "My sisters trust the calm will not long be disturbed, though I have always feared it was a deceitful one, and that we have been making ourselves happy over a barrel of gunpowder." Later he says: "I shall not concern myself with the justice or injustice of others; that must rest with themselves; it is sufficient for us to know that we have done nothing to deserve the ill opinion of any one. Our business is now more than ever with ourselves. I am entirely free from debt, and I trust, could I be made happy, to receive a good deal more than I do now by my profession. After this, my dearest Maria, I have nothing more to say, than the sooner we are married the better; and from this time I shall cease to listen to any arguments the other way, from any quarter. I wish your father to know what I have written, if you think with me."

All this winter Constable had been further troubled by anxiety over his father, whose health was in a very bad state. Towards the end of March, 1816, the artist arrived in London with two pictures for the Academy, "A Wheatfield" and "A Wood : Autumn," but was recalled to Bergholt by the death of his father, who died suddenly "while sitting in his chair, as usual, without a sigh or pang."

With both his parents dead, Constable, though he enjoyed the affectionate regards of his brothers and sisters, felt lonelier than ever, and hungered for a home of his own. The storm appears to have blown over, and during the summer John renewed his visits to Miss Bicknell. In August she writes : "Thank you, my dear John, for sending me your sweet picture. Come early this evening." During this month the artist visited his friends the Rebows, who behaved most kindly and generously. The general commissioned Constable to paint two landscapes, one of his park and another of a wood. Being well acquainted with the artist's love story, the general mentioned that while he could take his own time about them, he would pay for them in advance, knowing, as Constable writes, "*that we may soon want a little ready money.*" Another good friend, the Rev. John Fisher, wrote to Constable in September strongly urging him not to delay his wedding any longer, and inviting the artist and his prospective bride to spend their honeymoon with Mrs. Fisher and himself. The archdeacon's letter was very much to the point : "I intend to be in London on Tuesday evening, the 24th, and on Wednesday shall hold myself ready and happy to marry you. There, you see, I have used no roundabout phrases, but said the thing at once, in good plain English. So do you follow my example, and get you to your lady, and instead of blundering out long sentences about 'the Hymeneal altar,' etc., say that on Wednesday, September 25th, you are ready to marry her. If she replies, like a sensible woman, as I suspect she is, 'Well, John, here is my hand, I am ready,' all well and good. If she says, 'Yes, but another day will be more convenient,' let her name it, and I am at her service."

Constable sent Fisher's letter on to Maria, who now found herself firmly impaled on the horns of a dilemma, the warring points of which were her duty to her father and the duty which she now recognized she owed to John. Before Fisher's arrival, her conscience made one last filial struggle : "Papa is averse to everything I propose. If you please, you may write to him; it will do neither good nor harm. I hope we are not going to do a very foolish thing. . . . Once more, and for the last time ! it is not too late to follow Papa's advice and *wait*. . . . Notwithstanding all I have been writing, whatever you deem best, I do."

John deemed that they had waited long enough. After all, they were not children. Maria herself was twenty-nine; John had turned forty. The lady could not be ready by the 25th, but on October 2nd they were married at St. Martin's Church by Mr. Fisher, and spent the honeymoon with him and Mrs. Fisher at Osmington, near Weymouth.

Anticipating events, it may be said at once that Mr. Bicknell soon became reconciled to the marriage and grew very fond of his son-in-law. Old Dr. Rhudde was not so easily placated, but, somewhat to the surprise of the Constables, when he died, in 1819, it became known that he had left his granddaughter £4,000. Possibly, had she remained single, Maria might have inherited a larger portion of the "necessary evil."

CHAPTER II

THE MIDDLE YEARS

THAT married life suited Constable is a thing which even the most hardened cynic cannot dispute. He was happier now than he had ever been before, and his happiness was soon reflected in a series of noble paintings surpassing anything he had ever previously achieved. The couple set up house at 1, Keppel Street, Russell Square, and here was born the first son, to whom the name of his father was given. Leslie, his biographer, who got to know the artist intimately soon after the marriage, says that the boy was as often in his father's arms as in those of his nurse or his mother. "His fondness for children exceeded, indeed, that of any man I ever knew."

In 1817 he exhibited at the British Gallery "A Harvest-field with Reapers and Gleaners," and at the Academy "Scene on a Navigable River," "Wivenhoe Park," "A Cottage," and a portrait of Mr. Fisher. But now he was devoting himself more and more to landscape, and spent the autumn at Bergholt collecting material for his next year's pictures. Four landscapes were sent to the Academy in 1818, the most important being "Landscape : Breaking up of a Shower." To the British Gallery he sent "A Cottage in a Cornfield," of which Leslie observes : "The cottage in this little picture is closely surrounded by the corn, which on the side most shaded from the sun, remains green, while over the rest of the field it has ripened; one of many circumstances that may be discovered in Constable's landscapes, which mark them as the productions of an incessant observer of Nature."

Though Constable was painting at this time as well as ever he did, his exhibits appear to have attracted little notice; but in 1819 he had a greater success at the Academy with "A Scene on the River Stour," afterwards known as "Constable's White Horse," from the white horse in a barge near the foreground. Measuring 51 by 73 inches, this was the largest and most important work Constable had yet produced; it marked a distinct advance and attracted more notice than any of his previous exhibits. It was purchased by Archdeacon Fisher for 100 guineas, and was probably the cause of Constable being elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in the following November. Altogether, 1819 was a good year for Constable, his father's affairs being then wound up he inherited a sum of £4,000, and his wife presented him with a "lovely little girl," to whom his good friend Fisher stood godfather. In the following year he repeated his success at the Academy by exhibiting his magnificent "Stratford Mill," which was sold for 100 guineas, and three-quarters of a century later established a "Constable record" when it brought £8,925 at the Huth Sale in 1895.

This is the picture which was engraved by David Lucas as "The Young Waltonians," the new title being taken from the group of children fishing in the foreground. On the left-hand side of the canvas a glimpse is given of the old water-mill, which no longer exists, while to the right and in the middle distance a barge floats on the placid, willow-shaded waters of the Stour. A group of tall trees forms the centre of the composition, and the sky is exceedingly beautiful with light clouds which throw their shadows over a rising distance. Archdeacon Fisher purchased the picture as a present for his solicitor, Mr. Tinney, of

Salisbury, but since he considered the price of 100 guineas to be "far below its value," and since Constable himself was under some obligation to Mr. Tinney for services rendered, the reverend gentleman always alluded to the picture as "our joint present."

The friendship and admiration of Fisher was a great encouragement to Constable at this time, for though his reputation was steadily growing and his landscapes were at last beginning to find purchasers, it was a slow business, and unquestionably his wife could not have lived in the modest luxury to which she was accustomed had not the couple enjoyed the revenue of the £8,000 which they jointly possessed. One great point about Fisher was his loyal faith from the first in Constable's landscapes, and about this time the artist seems to have realized that portrait-painting never had been, nor would be, his true vocation. Writing to his friend about this time, Constable admits, "I fear (for my family's sake) I shall never make a popular artist, *a gentleman and ladies' painter*. But I am spared making a fool of myself, and your hand stretched forth, teaches me to value what I possess (if I may say so); and this is of more consequence than gentlemen and ladies can well imagine."

Four pictures were exhibited by Constable at the Academy of 1821: "Hampstead Heath," "A Shower," "Harrow," and "Landscape : Noon." The last was the third six-foot canvas he had painted, encouraged by Fisher's purchases to continue to work on this scale, and afterwards became famous as "The Haywain" (see illustration). Constable himself at first thought this picture "not so grand" as Mr. Tinney's (i.e., "Stratford Mill"), but confessed that "Owing, perhaps, to the masses not being so impressive, the power of the chiaroscuro is lessened, but it

has a more novel look than I expected." There was in truth a real novelty in this picture, but its vivacity and freshness did not make anything like the sensation at the Academy that they did in Paris three years later.

Opinions differ—always have differed, and no doubt always will differ—as to which is the greatest of Constable's big landscapes, but "The Hay-wain" is certainly one of the very best and the picture which, in the artist's own lifetime, made the greatest sensation of any. It is a typical English landscape, with a stormy sky showing masses of cumuli moving across the blue. The farmhouse on the left is none other than "Willy Lott's House," which figures in so many of Constable's paintings. It is identical with that depicted in "The Valley Farm," and its original name was "Gibeon's Farm," as, Mr. Herbert Tompkins tells us, "may be seen by a headstone at East Bergholt, where William Lott lies buried."* This farm was immediately adjoining Flatford Mill, and though the truth of the picture to the reality is vouched for by all who have wandered, like Constable, along the banks of the Stour, the real greatness of the picture lies in the fact that it is not only a faithful rendering of the actual scene, but is also an impressive interpretation of a mood of Nature. It is one of the earliest and most brilliant paintings of "weather" in British art.

Though Constable continued to find the themes of his greatest pictures in the near neighbourhood of his birthplace, he did not lack opportunity to change his painting-ground. In June, 1821, he visited Berkshire and Oxfordshire with his friend Fisher, and made pencil drawings and water-colours of

* Herbert W. Tompkins's "Constable," 1907.

scenery around Reading, Newbury, Abingdon, and Blenheim. A year earlier Constable had moved his home to 2, Lower Terrace, Hampstead, and in this north-western suburb the artist appeared to find themes more congenial to his powers than any outside his beloved Suffolk. The truth seems to have been that Constable was not a man who took kindly to making excursions in search of new subjects. He wanted to know his ground more thoroughly, he had to live in it, to master its peculiarities, to grow familiar with it and love it, before he was altogether happy to record it in paint. Further, his practice of painting his pictures, even great six-foot sketches, in the open air as much as possible, made a prolonged residence in one locality desirable. He was not fond, as other artists have been, of rushing off somewhere to make a slight sketch in a day, and then working up that sketch in the studio to make a picture. For these reasons the topographical range of Constable's art is limited, in comparison with that of Turner and others, and his principal paintings, with few exceptions, render scenes near Bergholt, his birthplace and country home, at Hampstead, his London home, or near Salisbury, the home of his most intimate friend, John Fisher, with whom he so often stayed.

In the Academy of 1822 Constable's principal contributions were again two Hampstead landscapes and "A View on the Stour, near Dedham"; but in the following year he broke new ground with his beautiful "Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Garden," as perfect a work as any of his great Suffolk landscapes. This picture was a commission from the Bishop of Salisbury as a present for his recently married daughter, who wanted "to have in her house in London a recollection of

Salisbury." Constable took a great deal of pains with this picture, which perhaps surpasses all his other works in the supreme and almost classic beauty of its design, the most striking feature of which is the natural sylvan arch through which the cathedral is seen. It was a theme which the artist must have loved both for its own sake and for its associations, and to a man of his affectionate and domestic temperament it must have been an added incentive to know that his picture was going to one who could not fail to be moved by the scene even more deeply than himself. Yet, with everything to keep his mind on Salisbury, even here he could not help allowing his inalienable affection for Suffolk unconsciously to peep out, as Leslie shrewdly discovered in his comment on this picture: "In the foreground he introduced a circumstance familiar to all who are in the habit of noticing cattle. With cows there is generally, if not always, one which is called, not very accurately, *the master cow*, and there is scarcely anything the rest of the herd will venture to do until the *master* has taken the lead. On the left of the picture this individual is drinking, and turns with surprise and jealousy to another cow approaching the canal lower down for the same purpose; they are of the Suffolk breed, without horns, and it is a curious mark of Constable's fondness for everything connected with his native county, that scarcely an instance may be found of a cow in any of his pictures, be the scene where it may, with horns."

When Constable moved to Hampstead he retained the use of his studio in Keppel Street for some years, but after the death of Farington, in 1822, he secured that painter's more convenient rooms at 35, Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square. He had now two

sons and two daughters, all of whom were ill, as well as himself and two of his servants, in the winter of 1822-3. His own state of health, and particularly his anxiety over his eldest son John, prevented Constable from finishing either of the large pictures he had intended to show at the Academy in 1823. The bishop's picture, "A Study of Trees," and "A Cottage" were all that he was able to send that year.

An amusing sidelight on Constable's private idiosyncrasies is thrown by a passage in which Fisher thanks the artist for having promptly purchased for him two old pictures that he wanted. "My dear Constable," he writes, "Where real business is to be done, you are the most energetic and punctual of men. In smaller matters, such as putting on your breeches, you are apt to lose time in deciding which leg shall go in first."

In this same letter Fisher wishes he could purchase "The Hay-wain," but declares "I cannot now reach what it is worth and what you must have. . . . It will be of the most value to your children by continuing to hang where it does, till you join the society of Ruysdael, Wilson, and Claude. As praise and money will then be of no value to you, the world will liberally bestow both." Fisher was a true prophet.

In October, 1823, Constable paid a long visit to Sir George and Lady Beaumont in Leicestershire, and was enraptured with the collection of pictures he found there. "Believe me," he writes to his wife, "I shall be the better for this visit as long as I live." On November 25th he writes again: "I feel that I have been *at school*, and can only hope that my long absence from you may ultimately be to my great and lasting improvement as an artist, and indeed, in everything."

Some precious fragments of the conversations between Constable and his host have been preserved. In those days connoisseurs had not allowed for the effect of time in degrading the brilliance of pigment, nor had the arts of cleaning and restoration advanced to the stage they have reached to-day. Darkness in a picture was thought to be a merit, and what was merely dirtiness was often praised as "tone." When Sir George Beaumont recommended the colour of an old Cremona fiddle for the prevailing tone of everything, Constable answered him by laying a violin on the green lawn before the house. Another time Sir George, who appeared to think autumn tints essential in at least some part of a landscape, whatever the time of year, asked : "Do you not find it very difficult to determine where to place your *brown tree*?" "Not in the least," replied Constable, "for I never put such a thing into a picture."

One of the chief reasons why Constable had so much difficulty in getting his landscapes accepted as the masterpieces which they really were, was because he ignored these conventions, based on a misunderstanding of the Old Masters, and looked at Nature for himself and endeavoured to paint the scenes he saw in their true colours.

The ridiculous and, to us, almost incredible length to which this craze for brown landscapes was carried in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is typically exemplified by one Matthews, whose "Diary of an Invalid" enjoyed a considerable popularity in the early part of the last century. Commenting on the collection of pictures in the Doria Palace, this wiseacre wrote : "Gaspar Poussin's green landscapes have no charm for me. The fact seems to be, that the delightful green of Nature

THE VALLEY FARM

Exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1835

In the Tate Gallery



cannot be represented in a picture. Our own Glover has perhaps made the greatest possible exertions to surmount the difficulty, and give with fidelity the real colours of Nature; but I believe the beauty of his pictures is in an inverse ratio to their fidelity; and that Nature must be stripped of her green livery, and dressed in the browns of the painters, or confined to her own autumnal tints in order to be transferred to canvas."

Needless to remark, when Constable came across this passage he was filled with indignation, but it is worth remembering, because it shows us so clearly how the great artist who persisted in painting Nature in her "green livery" was thereby defying the most cherished artistic convention of his day.

In January, 1824, a Frenchman, who in the previous year had tried to purchase "The Hay-wain," again approached Constable. Faithful to an old understanding, the artist informed Fisher of the proposal. "Let your 'Hay Cart' go to Paris by all means," his friend replied. "I am too much pulled down by the agricultural distress to hope to possess it. I would, I think, let it go at less than its price for the sake of the *éclat* it may give you. The stupid English public, which has no judgment of its own, will begin to think there is something in you if the French make your works national property. You have long lain under a mistake; men do not purchase pictures because they admire them, but because others covet them." Eventually, Constable sold "The Hay-wain," another large picture, "The Bridge," and a small picture of "Yarmouth" for £250 to the Frenchman, who hastened to take his treasures to France. When "The Hay-wain" was exhibited that summer in the Paris Salon, then held in the Louvre, it was the picture of the year,

and created immense excitement among the artists. Delacroix, one of the leading French painters and colorists of the time, was so amazed by its brilliance that on Varnishing Day he completely repainted his own picture, "The Massacre of Scio," which hung near by, in order that he might heighten its effect and endure the competition the better. Further, Constable's picture was not merely a nine-days' wonder, but had a lasting influence on French landscape painting. His influence permeated the group afterwards known as the Barbizon School, and Rousseau, Daubigny, Dupré, and others were among the first to hail him as master. There was a considerable desire for the French Government to purchase "The Hay-wain," but the owner asked 12,000 francs, which was considered prohibitive. Constable, however, was awarded a gold medal, and shortly afterwards "The Hay-wain" was sold for £400. Forty-two years later it was sold for £1,365, and in 1886 it was presented to the National Gallery, London, by Mr. Henry Vaughan. So England regained a masterpiece which it deserved to lose.

This French appreciation of Constable's art not only helped him in London, as Fisher prophesied, but also opened up a new market for Constable's landscapes. That same June an unknown French gentleman and his wife called on Constable and "ordered a little picture," and before this Constable had undertaken to get "seven pictures of a small size" ready for Paris by August. Nevertheless, the artist was by no means free from money troubles, brought about chiefly by recurrent illnesses in his family, which added to his expenses and his anxieties. In 1825 his wife presented him with a third daughter, and this year, as in the previous one, Constable kept his family

at Brighton for the sake of their health during a good part of the summer, while he himself stayed hard at work in town, and could not remain with them for long.

His principal picture in the exhibition of 1825 was "The Lock"—that is to say, "Dedham Lock," and still better known under the title of "The Leaping Horse." This picture, now in the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House, is usually considered one of the artist's finest works, unsurpassed for its energy and movement. Leslie gives an interesting account of the incident which gives the painting its popular title. "The chief object in its foreground," he writes, "is a horse, mounted by a boy, leaping one of the barriers which cross the towing paths along the Stour . . . to prevent the cattle from quitting their bounds. As these bars are without gates, the horses, which are of a much finer race, and kept in better condition than the wretched animals that tow the barges near London, are all taught to leap; their harness ornamented over the collar with crimson fringe adds to their picturesque appearance; and Constable, by availing himself of these advantages, and relieving the horse, which is of a dark colour, upon a bright sky, made him a very imposing object."

Preparatory to painting this big picture, Constable, according to his habit, made a six-foot sketch of the same subject on the spot. This large sketch is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and it is exceedingly instructive to compare this sketch with the painting at Burlington House. One great difference between the two pictures is that whereas, in the sketch, the willow tree on the towing path is further to our right *in front of the barrier and the leaping horse*, in the finished picture Constable has deliberately moved this willow tree

further to the left and placed it *behind* the horse, thereby considerably improving the rhythmic design of the composition, the main line of which now flows diagonally from the mass of trees on the extreme left, over the top of the willow, through the horse, and is completed by the sloping timber supporting the wooden bridge in the foreground to our right.

This change in the relative positions of the horse and the willow is exceedingly important, because it proves that when Constable called himself a "natural painter" he did not mean that he intended to copy Nature exactly as he saw it before him without any reference to the laws of design and science of composition. His aim always was to preserve the effect of *general truth*, but in the manipulation of details he allowed himself that latitude of arrangement which is essential to the science of picture-making. Vigorous and fine as the sketch for "The Leaping Horse" may be, it is less satisfactory than the picture, because our eyes, falling downwards from the clump of trees to the horse, are jerked upwards again by the perpendicular lines of the willow. In the larger painting at Burlington House we have no similar distraction or interruption, but all flows smoothly together, gaining thereby for the picture an increased harmony and rhythm and unity of effect. Constable records the change made in this picture in his own diary, in which the following entry occurs :—

"September 7th.—Got up early. Set to work on my large picture; took out the old willow stump by the horse, which has improved the picture much; made one or two other alterations."

From this we learn two things : firstly, that when originally exhibited the large picture must have resembled the South

Kensington sketch more closely, and, secondly, that the picture did not find a purchaser by the time the Academy had closed.

Constable had sold two other landscapes he exhibited at the Academy, again to an entire stranger (Mr. Francis Darby, of Colebrook Dale), but his pleasure in this renewed success was soon overclouded by his anxiety over the health of his son John, who was very ill indeed. About this time there is a gap in Constable's correspondence, possibly because he was too worried to write much to his friends, but we can gain some idea as to the state of his mind and of his finances from a letter written to him on August 12th, by Fisher. The good cleric offers to take the sick boy into his own house and give him "the best advice the country affords, with sea air, sea bathing, and good food," or, alternatively, if Constable thinks it preferable, to take one of his healthy boys and look after him. "As for money matters," he continues, "do not make yourself uneasy. Write for anything you want, and send me any picture, in pledge, you think proper. Your family or yourself shall have the *difference* whenever it is called for. Whatever you do, Constable, get rid of anxiety. It hurts the stomach more than arsenic. It generates only fresh cause for anxiety by producing inaction and loss of time."

While acknowledging himself "overcome by your kind and most friendly letter," Constable did not take advantage of this offer, but instead sent all his family again to Brighton, where the boy's health seems to have improved. In the same letter Constable craves Fisher's forgiveness for having lent his picture "The White Horse" to an exhibition at Lille. It is a little difficult to understand why Constable did not send "The

Leaping Horse" to this exhibition. He liked it himself, speaking of it once as "silvery, windy, and delicious; all health, and the absence of everything stagnant." If the general public did not warm to it then, as it has done later, it was highly praised not only by its author's friends, but by independent artists whose unsolicited tributes ought to have been gratifying.

One of the most eloquent appreciations uttered concerning this famous picture came from the mezzotinter, S. W. Reynolds, who undertook to engrave it at his own risk. Writing to Constable, he said: "It is, no doubt, the best of your works, true to Nature, seen and arranged with a professor's taste and judgment. The execution shows in every part a hand of experience; the colouring is sweet, fresh, and healthy; bright, not gaudy, but deep and clear. Take it for all in all, since the days of Gainsborough and Wilson, no landscape has been painted with so much truth and originality, so much art, so little artifice." Illness overtook Reynolds while he was working on this, and he did not live to complete his plate; but the subject was afterwards engraved by David Lucas.

Early in 1826 Constable was able to inform his friend Fisher that he was the recipient of another gold medal from France, awarded him at Lille, where he had sent "The White Horse." But while his fame was extending and his reputation growing, the artist was still in difficulties, for in the same letter he confesses: "My large picture is at a standstill owing to the ruined state of my finances." This large picture was probably "The Opening of Waterloo Bridge," of which Constable had made a sketch so far back as 1817, but though he worked on the subject from time to time, he had not yet been able to complete

the large picture. To gain bread and butter for his family and to pay the doctor's bills, he could not afford to give the time necessary to the continuing of this work, but had to turn to something more immediately profitable, the execution of various commissions which he had on hand. This is what he means, no doubt, in his letter to Fisher; but, having laid aside the Waterloo Bridge picture, Constable was able to set to work this spring on another good sized painting. This was "The Cornfield" (see illustration), which, if one may judge by the extent to which it has been reproduced, is to-day the most popular of all Constable's pictures.

In April he writes to his friend Fisher: "I have dispatched a large landscape to the Academy, upright, of the size of the 'Lock,' but a subject of a very different nature; inland corn fields, a close lane forming the foreground; it is not neglected in any part; the trees are more than usually studied, the extremities well defined, as well as the stems; they are shaken by a pleasant and healthful breeze at noon,

" 'while now a fresher gale

" 'Sweeping with shadowy gusts the fields of corn,' etc.

"I am not, however, without my anxieties, though I have not neglected my work, or been sparing of my pains. . . . I am much worn, having worked hard, and have now the consolation of knowing I must work a great deal harder, or go to the work-house; I have some commissions, however, and I do hope to sell the present picture. — threatens me with having to paint his portrait.

" 'Angels and ministers of grace, defend me !'

SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

Painted 1823

In the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington



"He is hospitable, but there is a coarseness about him that is intolerable."

Picture it ! Constable is now fifty years old, he is already the painter of immortal landscapes, and still he is not free from the fear of portrait-painting, that one sure refuge for the impecunious artist, because it is an ever-present demand firmly found on the impregnable rock of human vanity ! By this time, at any rate, Constable has learnt to dread portraits and is conscious that it is unworthy of his true genius to undertake them.

The exact locality of the scene depicted in "The Cornfield" has been a matter of some dispute. Once it was thought to be a scene in Essex, but later was found to be a field in Suffolk, about one mile from the Stour. The church in the picture was long thought to be that of Dedham, but in 1869 one of the artist's sons pointed out that Dedham Church is farther to the right, beyond the field of the picture. We are bound to conclude, therefore, that the church tower, seen among the trees in the background, is justified not by the facts, but by the licence permitted to an artist; its presence here is a further proof that the artist was not afraid to "arrange" his subjects, that Constable was not the slave, but the master of Nature. Contrary to the artist's expectations, this lovely picture remained unsold, but after Constable's death it was bought for £315 by "an association of gentlemen" and presented to the National Gallery.

In the November of this year the Constable family was increased by the addition of a sixth child, a third son, and in the following year (1827) the artist moved to "a comfortable little house in Well Walk, Hampstead"—which still stands now much as it was in Constable's day—and only retained a part of

the premises in Charlotte Street for a studio and showroom. To the Academy this year Constable sent a large painting of "The Marine Parade and Chain Pier at Brighton," and smaller landscapes of "Hampstead Heath" and "A Water Mill at Gillingham, Dorset."

The next year (1828) opened well. In January Mrs. Constable gave birth to another son, named Lionel Bicknell; of two landscapes by Constable, in the Academy, one, "Hampstead Heath," was bought by Chantrey the sculptor, and the other, "Dedham Vale," was highly praised, and pronounced by the artist to be "perhaps my best"; the grief of Mrs. Constable in losing her father was mitigated by learning that Mr. Bicknell had left her and her husband £20,000.

"This I will settle on my wife and children" writes Constable to Fisher, "that I may do justice to his good opinion of me. It will make me happy, and I shall stand before a six-foot canvas with a mind at ease, thank God!"

This letter is particularly interesting, because in it Constable gives some account of the current exhibition at the Academy, alluding particularly to the work of his great rival: "Turner has some golden visions, glorious and beautiful; they are only visions, but still they are art, and one could live and die with such pictures."

For the rest, Constable thought: "The exhibition is poor; but though the talent is small, its produce in money has been very great; £150 per diem, perhaps, on an average." These satisfactory takings for entrance-fees and catalogues were evidently not affected by the presence of "Some portraits that would petrify you," as Constable remarked to Fisher.

But, alas, at the moment when the artist was congratulating

himself that his mind could now be at ease, fresh troubles were brewing ! In the spring he had been called to Flatford by the serious illness of his brother, Abram Constable, and from Flatford he was recalled to London by the illness of his wife, who never really got over her last confinement. Constable took her to Brighton in the early summer, and when she returned to Hampstead in August he was cheered because "her cough is pretty well gone," though anxious because she was still "sadly thin and weak." But though Constable tried to believe his wife was getting stronger, and friends tried to confirm him in his belief, she was getting worse and worse. What lay underneath the "cough" was pulmonary consumption. At last, Constable could no longer deceive himself, but though he "appeared in his usual spirits" while he was in his wife's presence, Leslie tells us one November day how, "before I left the house, he (Constable) took me into another room, wrung my hand, and burst into tears, without speaking." Mrs. Constable died on November 23rd that year, and her husband never wholly recovered from the blow of her loss.

By one of life's little ironies, the official acknowledgment of Constable's talent came swiftly now he was deprived of the partner of his joys and sorrows. On February 10, 1829, Constable was elected an Academician. That this well-merited distinction should have arrived so late is, as Leslie has said, "a proof that the progress of an original style of art, in the estimation even of artists, is very slow." Constable himself, though naturally pleased at his election, also felt that it was too late, and could not help saying : "It has been delayed until I am solitary, and cannot impart it."

CHAPTER III

LAST YEARS

AMONG the many who hastened to condole with Constable on the loss of his wife was his old friend Archdeacon Fisher, whose advice was as follows : "For your comfort, during the trial upon you for the exercise of your patience, you should apply yourself rigidly to your profession. Some of the finest works of art, and most vigorous exertions of intellect, have been the result of periods of distress. Poor Wilson painted all his finest landscapes under the pressure of sorrow." Perhaps this advice was as good as any that could be given to the sorrowing widower, but, however well-intentioned, one suspects its accuracy. In the case of Richard Wilson in particular we know that penury restricted his production of paintings, and his finest landscapes were probably painted in the brighter intervals of his sad career.

To say that Constable produced *all* his best paintings before his wife's death would certainly be rash, but it can confidently be asserted that never afterwards did he do more than equal what he had done before. Now that he was relieved of all financial anxiety, he was hampered by other troubles; he was apt to be depressed in spirits and, as the years went on, his health suffered, rheumatism attacked him from time to time, and once for three weeks he was unable to hold a brush in his hand. Nevertheless, in the main he followed Fisher's advice and sought to forget his sorrow in work.

Early in 1829 he commenced a great project, namely, the publication of an engraved record of characteristic examples of his landscape. In this undertaking he was fortunate in securing the co-operation of an engraver, David Lucas, who in his own way was as great a genius as Constable himself. Sir C. J. Holmes, the present Director of the National Gallery, has not hesitated to assert that Lucas's plates of "Mr. Constable's English Landscape" form "the most magnificent series of landscape mezzotints ever produced." Greatly as we admire the hand of Lucas, who executed these engravings, we shall do well to remember that this hand was constantly under the control of the master-painter himself. During the preparation and engraving of each plate Constable was in constant communication with Lucas, supervising the work, discussing difficulties, and suggesting improvements. Never before in the history of art had painter and engraver worked together in such close and friendly intimacy; each had regard and respect for the other, and though it soon appeared doubtful whether the enterprise was likely to be successful financially, both men persevered to the end to attain perfection.

Begun in 1829, the "English Landscape" series was published in five parts, the last appearing in 1833. The price of the complete set was only five guineas. In a prospectus the object of the series was set out as follows: "It is the desire of the Author in this publication to increase the interest for, and promote the study of the rural scenery of England, with all its endearing associations, and even in its most simple localities; of England with her climate of more than vernal freshness, in whose summer skies and rich autumnal clouds, 'in thousand

liveries dight,' the observer of Nature may daily watch her endless varieties of effect."

We need not question the sincerity of Constable's desire for a more general appreciation of the beauty of England's rural scenery, if we surmise that he also had another object in view in publishing the series. He was well aware of the purblindness of his own generation as regards Nature, and of its prejudice against his own "natural" landscape, and he no doubt hoped that these engravings would help the public to understand better and enjoy more fully his paintings. In the preface to the publication he stated the case for his own style with moderation and dignity.

"In art," he wrote, "there are two modes by which men aim at distinction. In the one, by a careful application to what others have accomplished, the artist imitates their works, or selects and combines their various beauties; in the other, he seeks excellence at its primitive source, Nature. In the first, he forms a style upon the study of pictures, and produces either imitative or eclectic art; in the second, by a close observation of Nature, he discovers qualities existing in her which have never been portrayed before, and thus forms a style which is original. The results of the one mode, as they repeat that with which the eye is already familiar, are soon recognized and estimated, while the advances of the artist in a new path must necessarily be slow, for few are able to judge of that which deviates from the usual course, or are qualified to appreciate original studies."

The first plate engraved was "Dedham Mill," made from a slight sketch, but never again did Constable put anything but

a finished work in Lucas's hands. Indeed, the selection of the subjects gave the painter as much anxiety as the progress of the engraving, and as an example of his fastidiousness and exacting care in this respect it may be mentioned that, chiefly on this account, he rejected five plates that Lucas had finished.

In its complete form, as published in 1833, the "English Landscape" consisted of twenty-two plates with a frontispiece, "House and Grounds of the late Golding Constable, Esq., East Bergholt, Suffolk." Twelve of the plates are Suffolk landscapes, three show scenes at Hampstead, while among the remainder are views of Weymouth Bay, Yarmouth, Brighton, Old Sarum, Hadleigh Castle, and Redhill. There should have been a greater number of plates, but the work was interrupted first by the illness of Constable, then by the illness of Mrs. Lucas and one of her children, and the circumstances which eventually curtailed the enterprise are revealed only too plainly in a letter from the painter to Lucas dated March 12, 1831.

"I have thought much on my book," writes Constable, "and all my reflections on the subject go to oppress me; its duration, its expense, its hopelessness of remuneration, added to which, I now discover that the printsellers are watching it as their lawful prey, and they alone can help me. I can only dispose of it by giving it away. My plan is to confine the number of plates to those now on hand; I see we have about twenty. The three present numbers contain twelve; others begun are about eight or ten more, some of which may not be resumed, and we must begin the frontispiece. It harasses my days, and disturbs my rest at nights. The expense is too enormous for a work that has nothing but your beautiful feeling and execution to

BOAT-BUILDING, NEAR FLATFORD MILL

Painted 1815

In the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington



recommend it. The painter himself is totally unpopular, and ever will be on this side the grave; the subjects *nothing but the art*, and the buyers wholly ignorant of that. . . . Years must roll on to produce the twenty-six prints, and all this time I shall not sell a copy. Remember, dear Lucas, I mean not, nor think one reflection on you. Everything, with the plan, is my own, and I want to relieve my mind of that which harasses it like a disease. Do not for a moment think I blame you, or that I do not sympathize with you in those lamentable causes of hindrance which have afflicted your home. Pray, let me see you soon. I am not wholly unable to work, thank God! I hope poor Mrs. Lucas is better. Dr. Davis has been to see me and my poor boy John, who is very ill."

In this pathetic letter the real tragedy of Constable's life is brought home to us, though the artist never regarded himself as a tragic figure and, looking backwards in his latter days, declared that his life had been "happy, but unpropitious." There was no bitterness in him, but only a deep melancholy because "the painter himself is totally unpopular." Unfortunately, it was true; during his lifetime the landscapes of Constable not only failed to find favour with the public, but they were disliked by a great number of his brother artists. A proof of this was afforded once when Constable was on the Council of the Royal Academy. His picture "Stream bordered with Willows"—now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and entitled "Water Meadows near Salisbury"—accidentally got separated from his other pictures for the Academy, and, having been put with pictures by "outsiders," was in its turn brought before the jury. Constable said nothing during a discussion at

the end of which the picture was rejected, but just as it was being taken out some person noticed the signature of the artist, "John Constable." Profuse apologies followed and the other members of the jury wanted the picture brought back, but now Constable intervened and forbade its retention. His picture had been openly condemned, and he would not permit it to be exhibited in the Academy.

Though hampered by failing health during the four years in which so much of his time and energy had been poured into the task of preparing the "English Landscape" for publication, the artist contrived none the less to keep up his output of paintings and to send regularly to the Academy. His exhibits in 1830 were "Dell in Helmingham Park," "A View of Hampstead Heath," and another small landscape; in 1831 he sent a large picture of "Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows" and a smaller one of "Yarmouth Pier." Constable had taken particular pains with his Salisbury picture; it was a subject which occupied his attention for some years, and he told his friend William Purton, of Hampstead, once that he hoped to make it his "best picture." Though less decorative, perhaps, than the "Bishop's Garden" view, it is a grand and stately work, as all who have seen it will agree, but at the Academy it was only a partial success. It was pronounced to be "chaotic," and it was a poor consolation that, after roundly abusing it, a critic should be forced in the end to admit "It is still a picture from which it is impossible to turn without admiration."

That even now the great landscape painter was exposed to the criticism of all and sundry is most amusingly exemplified by an incident which occurred this August and is related as

follows to his friend Leslie : "Varley, the astrologer, has just called on me; and I have bought a little drawing of him. He told me how to '*do* landscape,' and was so kind as to point out all my defects. The price of the drawing was 'a guinea and a half *to a gentleman*, and a guinea only to an *artist*,' but I insisted on his taking the larger sum, as he had clearly proved to me that I was no artist."

Constable certainly suffered fools gladly, and his extraordinary gentleness, forbearance, and good humour are well illustrated by his generous behaviour towards this officious charlatan.

On September 9 the artist saw the Coronation, a sight which roused all his loyalty to the throne : "I was in the Abbey eleven hours, and saw with my own eyes the crown of England put on the head of that good man, William IV, and that, too, in the chair of a saint ! I saw also the gentle Adelaide crowned, and I trust, what may now be called the *better half* of England's crown has sought its own wearer in this instance. . . . I sat so that I commanded a view of all the peers placed in raised ranks in the south transept. The moment the King's crown was on, they all crowned themselves. At the same instant the shouts of 'God save the King,' the trumpets, the band, the drums of the soldiers in the nave, and last, though not least, the artillery, which could be distinguished amid all this din, and the jar even felt, made it eminently imposing. The white ermine of the peers looked lovely in the sun; I shall sketch some of the effects; the tone of the walls was sublime, heightened, no doubt, by the trappings, like an old picture in a newly gilt frame."

Politics, so far as we know, had hitherto had little interest for Constable, but this autumn he became quite worried and alarmed about the progress of the Reform Bill. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the "totally unpopular" painter should have had little confidence in the judgment of the masses, but it is remarkable that, with his experience, he should have had more faith in the wisdom of the nobility.

"What makes me dread this tremendous attack on the constitution of the country," he writes to Leslie, "is, that the wisest and best of the Lords are seriously and firmly objecting to it; and it goes to give the government into the hands of the rabble and dregs of the people, and the devil's agents on earth, the agitators. Do you think that the Duke of Wellington, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Copley, and Eldon, and Abbot, and all the wisest and best men we have, would oppose it if it was to do good to the country? I do not. No Whig Government ever can do good to this peculiar country."

From which we may gather that Constable was a stanch old Tory at heart, though it is more than likely that this outburst was not so much the result of his concern with politics as a symptom that he was in ill-health and low spirits. For later on in the following month, November, he informs Leslie: "I am now, perhaps, quite well, and I can give you no greater proof of it than by telling you that the Reform Bill now gives me not the least concern. I care nothing about it, and have no curiosity to know whether it be dead or alive, or, if dead, whether it will revive from its ashes."

In December the artist was disabled by acute rheumatism—"my left side and arm prevented my working by pain and

helplessness"—but he kept cheerful and rejoiced to Leslie: "Thank God, this right hand is left me entire." January, 1832, found the artist still in bed, but, notwithstanding his ill-health, he managed this spring to complete and exhibit at the Academy his big picture, "The Opening of Waterloo Bridge," upon which he had been working for so many years. It certainly gave him more trouble than any other picture; not only had he continually altered and repainted the big picture, but he had made innumerable studies for it—a sketch and a small painting of this subject can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Yet in the end the picture was not considered a success. Even Leslie calls it "a glorious failure," and states his belief that in this picture Constable "had indulged in the vagaries of the palette-knife (which he used with great dexterity) to an excess." Constable had laid on the pigment freely with his palette-knife in order to attain brilliance of colour, but this method compelled a sacrifice of detail which, as Leslie says, "too much offended those who were unable to see the look of Nature it gave at the proper distance." Even the painter's brother artist and friend Stothard "shook his head and said: 'Very unfinished, sir.'"

Constable's "Waterloo Bridge" is what we should to-day call an impressionist picture; not a detailed inventory of the scene, but a general impression of its colour and movement; and after all his apologies for it, Leslie stoutly maintained that "the noonday splendour of its colour would make almost any work of Canaletto, if placed beside it, look like moonlight." The roughness of its surface, due to the use of the palette-knife, also disturbed many people, and it is supposed that it was after hearing some of the criticisms passed on this work

that the artist wrote the famous passage, found on a scrap of paper among his memoranda, "My art flatters nobody by *imitation*, it courts nobody by *smoothness*, it tickles nobody by *petiteness*, it is without either *fal-de-lal* or *fiddle-de-dee*; how, then, can I hope to be popular?"

Constable himself was always uncertain about the success of his "Opening of Waterloo Bridge," to which he once jocularly alluded as his "Lord Mayor's Show." Eventually he would not allow it to be engraved, telling Lucas it was "too good a joke to be received into *our* church. Nothing can make it either apostolic or canonical, so uncongenial is any part of this hideous Gomorrah." Since 1819, when it had first entered into his head to paint this subject, he had again and again taken it up only to lay it aside, doubting and doubtful, and he was thinking about it off and on for thirteen years before he got it finished. It is not to be wondered at if during this lengthy period his first enthusiasm for it became cool and his original zest grew stale. Leslie probably penetrated to the heart of the matter when he commented: "The expanse of sky and water tempted him to go on with it, while the absence of all rural associations made it distasteful to him; and when at last it came forth, though possessing very high qualities—composition, breadth, and brightness of colour—it wanted one which generally constituted the greatest charm of his pictures—*sentiment*—and it was condemned by the public; though perhaps less for a deficiency which its subject occasioned than for its want of finish."

An amusing story of Turner is told in connexion with this picture. It appears that in the course of the arrangement of

the exhibition at Somerset House, "The Opening of Waterloo Bridge" was placed near a seapiece by Turner—"a singularly beautiful, grey picture, devoid of any positive colour." One day, whilst Constable was adding further colour to the flags and other decorations of the City barges, Turner came into the room repeatedly. Standing behind Constable, he looked from one painting to the other. Presently he fetched his palette and placed, on his own grey sea, a round spot of red lead rather larger than a shilling. The red lead was so brilliant, so conspicuous on the surrounding grey, that even Constable's colours paled by comparison. When Turner had left the room, Leslie entered it. Constable remarked: "He has been here and fired a gun." Near by, on the opposite wall, hung the "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" of George Jones. Said Abraham Cooper: "A coal has bounced across the room from Jones's picture and set fire to Turner's sea." "The great man," adds Leslie, "did not come into the room again for a day and a half; and then, in the last moments that were allowed for painting, he glazed the scarlet seal he had put upon his picture, and shaped it into a buoy."

Hardly had Constable recovered his own health that summer than his eldest daughter became alarmingly ill with scarlet fever. During June her position was extremely critical, but in July she got better and was able to go away to Brighton. More trials, however, were in store for him. In August his "dear friend" Archdeacon Fisher died suddenly at Boulogne, whither he had gone with Mrs. Fisher to recuperate after a long illness. "This sudden and awful event has strongly affected me," wrote Constable to Leslie. "The closest intimacy had subsisted

between us for many years; we loved each other, and confided in each other entirely, and his loss makes a sad gap in my worldly prospects. He would have helped my children, for he was a good adviser, though impetuous, and he was a truly religious man. I cannot tell you how singularly his death has affected me."

All this summer, too, Constable had been very worried about John Dunthorne, junior. This son of his old Suffolk friend had come to London and was for many years Constable's assistant, afterwards developing into a skilful picture-cleaner, whom Constable had much aided and helped to find employment. The poor fellow grew gradually worse during the autumn, and finally died. Constable went down to Suffolk for the funeral, and wrote sadly to Lucas: "I returned last night after seeing the last of poor John; no one can supply his place with me." On the return journey, however, an incident occurred which must have cheered the painter considerably. "In the coach yesterday, coming from Suffolk," he writes, "were two gentlemen and myself, all strangers to each other. In passing the vale of Dedham, one of them remarked, on my saying it was beautiful, 'Yes, sir, this is Constable's country.' I then told him who I was, lest he should spoil it." His landscapes may not have been so popular as he could have wished, but Constable had his admirers, and it must have been gratifying thus to meet one unexpectedly.

This December, Constable moved himself and his family from Well Walk, Hampstead, back to Charlotte Street. "We are all looking round with astonishment," he writes, "at having been so long away from so comfortable a house as this." During

the early part of 1833 Constable began his picture of the cenotaph erected by Sir George Beaumont in his own grounds to the memory of Sir Joshua Reynolds, but he laid it aside in order to complete his fine oil-painting of "Englefield House, Berkshire : Morning," commissioned by the owner of the house, Mr. Benyon de Beauvoir. This picture was considered a success, and found much favour at the Academy, where it was exhibited together with "A Cottage in a Cornfield," "Landscape : Sunset," "A Heath," "Showery Noon," and three water-colours. But though others praised him rather more than usual, the painter himself seems to have been dissatisfied, for, writing to a friend about the exhibition, after mentioning Wilkie, Leslie, Phillips, Landseer, and Shee, he says : "Constable is weak this year." This letter was written to a Mr. George Constable; no relation of the painter, with whom John Constable got very friendly in his last years.

A good retort was made by the painter to a captious critic who said the "Englefield" picture was "only a *picture of a house*, and ought to have been put in the Architectural Room." Constable replied : "It is a picture of a summer morning, including a house."

During this summer Constable gave at Hampstead his first public lecture, his subject being "An Outline of the History of Landscape Painting." It was not written out, and so was never published, but was delivered from notes, some of which have been preserved by Leslie. From these it would appear that after giving a review of this branch of the art from classical times, the chief point made by the lecturer was that after the death of the great Dutch painters, Rembrandt, Ruysdael,

Cuyp, etc., "landscape rapidly declined, and during almost the whole of the succeeding century little was produced beyond mannered and feeble imitations of their art—the painters of this period adding nothing to the general stock, as their predecessors had done by original study, but referring always to the pictures of their masters instead of looking to the aspects of Nature which had given birth to those pictures. From this degraded and fallen state it is delightful to say that landscape painting revived in our own country, in all its purity, simplicity and grandeur, in the works of Wilson, Gainsborough, Cozens, and Girtin."

Early in 1834 both Constable and his eldest son John, who were now back again at Well Walk, Hampstead, were ill with rheumatic fever. The painter had a long and severe attack, lasting for the greater part of two months, and accompanied by severe pain. His friend and medical attendant, Mr. Evans, writing to Mr. William Purton, another of Constable's friends at Hampstead, at a much later date testified: "These sufferings he bore with great patience for one of so sensitive a frame; and on the occasion of my visits to him, his cheerfulness was generally restored, and his conversation was of the same delightful character which you know so well. . . . I think he was never so well after this severe illness; its effects were felt by him, and showed themselves in his looks ever afterwards; so that I think it may be said to have had some share in his removal from us."

Owing to this long illness Constable was unable to send any oil-painting to the Academy this year, where he was represented only by five drawings, among them being water-colours

of "The Mound of the City of Old Sarum" and "Stoke Poges Church, the Scene of Gray's 'Elegy.'" In July the painter was able to pay a visit with his son to his friend George Constable at Arundel, with the scenery of which he was delighted. "The castle is the chief ornament of this place," he tells Leslie; "but all here sinks to insignificance in comparison with the woods and hills. The woods hang from steeps and precipices, and the trees are beyond everything beautiful." In September he visited Lord Egremont at Petworth, where he spent a fortnight and "filled a large book with sketches in pencil and water-colours." Back in London in the October, he set to work again on "Salisbury from the Meadows." This, according to Leslie, "was a picture which he felt would probably in future be considered his greatest; for if among his smaller works there were many of more perfection of finish, this he considered as conveying the fullest impression of the compass of his art. But it met with no purchaser."

In the following April the artist wrote a delightful letter to his friend George Constable, who had invited the artist's son John to accompany him on a trip to France. This invitation it was impossible to accept because, as his father explained, young John was now extremely busy studying as a medical student at London University and attending lectures on chemistry, anatomy, etc. He then continues: "Having spoken of the young chymist and surgeon, let me speak of the old landscape painter. I have got my picture into a very beautiful state; I have kept my brightness without my spottiness, and I have preserved God Almighty's daylight, which is enjoyed by all mankind, excepting only the lovers of dirty old canvas,

perished pictures at a thousand guineas each, cart grease, tar, and snuff of candle."

The picture to which the artist here alludes was a "View of Willy Lott's House," better known as "The Valley Farm" (see illustration), now hanging in the Tate Gallery. This beautiful work was painted from an early sketch, and it was the only picture Constable sent to the Academy of 1835. To use a modern term, it had a "better Press" than any picture Constable had previously exhibited there, and was bought before the exhibition opened by Mr. Robert Vernon. Always a most popular work, a typical and characteristic example of the artist's later manner, "The Valley Farm" is especially to be admired for its effective arrangement of the masses. While the scene appears absolutely natural, the design closely follows the diagonal line of an orthodox classic composition. There is a triangle of dark, with a little light in it, on the lower and right-hand side; and a triangle of light, with a few darks in it, on the upper left-hand side. The house itself, in the centre of the canvas, lies between these two triangles, contributing light to the dark, and dark to the light section. The farm, however, is not the dominant note in the picture; more important are the tall trees which overshadow it, beneath which a man with a punting-pole is pushing off a boat into midstream; and equally important is the great expanse of luminous, cloud-laden sky. Very beautiful and subtle throughout is the play of light among the trees, upon the water, on the house itself, and on the shirt-sleeves of the man poling; it is a network of light and shade, embroidered into an exquisitely balanced composition, full of art, yet with a simplicity that rivals Nature herself.

This summer Constable gave his second lecture on landscape at Hampstead, and though no notes of it have been preserved, it seems probable that in it he alluded in the highest terms to John Cozens, for shortly before the lecture, in a letter to a friend, he writes enthusiastically of Cozens as "the greatest genius that ever touched landscape."

In the autumn Constable visited Worcester, where, by special invitation, he delivered lectures on October 6th, 7th, and 8th. Back in London in November, he decided not to begin a big picture this year, characteristically telling George Constable "a size smaller will be better, and more of them; such as will suit my friends' pockets; though 'tis too late in life for me to think of ever becoming a popular painter. Besides, a knowledge of the world, and I have little of it, goes farther towards that than a knowledge of art."

In 1836 the Royal Academy was to hold its last exhibition in Somerset House previous to its removal to new quarters, and that spring Constable put all his other paintings aside in order to finish in time for the exhibition his picture of "The Cenotaph." He had been working earlier in the year on a painting of "Arundel Mill and Castle," but, as he told George Constable, "I found I could not do both, and so I preferred to see Sir Joshua Reynolds's name and Sir George Beaumont's once more in the catalogue, for the last time at the old house."

In describing "The Cenotaph" in the catalogue, Constable quoted the lines inscribed on it, written by Wordsworth at Sir George Beaumont's request :—

"Ye Lime-trees ranged before this hallowed Urn,
Shoot forth with lively power at Spring's return;

And be not slow a stately growth to rear
Of pillars, branching off from year to year,
Till they have learn'd to frame a darksome aisle;—
That may recall to mind that awful Pile
Where Reynolds, 'mid our country's noblest dead,
In the last sanctity of fame is laid.

“There, though by right the excelling Painter sleep
Where Death and Glory a joint Sabbath keep,
Yet not the less his Spirit would hold dear
Self-hidden praise, and Friendship's private tear:
Hence, on my patrimonial grounds, have I
Raised this frail tribute to his memory;
From youth a zealous follower of the Art
That he professed, attached to him in heart;
Admiring, loving, and with grief and pride,
Feeling what England lost when Reynolds died.”

“The Cenotaph” is unique among all Constable's paintings. One might think he had the prejudices of his old friend and patron in mind when he presented this aspect of Sir George's park as a brown landscape. The autumnal tints of the foliage, however, were the natural result of Constable having made his studies on the spot late in the autumn; it was by deliberate choice, on the other hand, that he took the afternoon as his time of day. Both these things were very unusual with Constable, though it must be admitted that the fall of the year and the wane of day were peculiarly appropriate to the significance of the picture. Another unusual thing for a Constable landscape is the absence in this picture of any vestige of human

life. Apart from the deer in the foreground and a robin-redbreast perched on a corner of the monument, there is no living thing in the landscape, which is impressive, almost awe-inspiring, in its solitude, and is impregnated with a deep feeling of resigned sadness without parallel in the art of Constable. For in all his other works, whether sketches or large or small paintings, Constable is essentially a cheerful painter. There is a touch of solemnity in his Salisbury pictures, in his view of "Old Sarum," but none of these equal the solemnity of "The Cenotaph." Richly painted with loaded pigment, the picture has that glittering effect so characteristic of Constable and so offensive to many of his contemporaries, though the trees, partly denuded of their leaves, permit the perfection of his drawing of boughs to be seen more plainly than in any other of his pictures.

"The Cenotaph" was Constable's last great picture, and to the superstitiously minded there seems to be something almost uncanny in the coincidence that in the evening of his days he should have departed so far from his usual practice and, turning aside from noonday splendour and the full foliage of summer, have uttered as his swan-song this sonorous tribute to the moving majesty of the yellow leaf.

On Thursday, May 26th, and on the following three Thursdays at 3 p.m. Constable delivered four lectures at the Royal Institution in Albemarle Street on "The History of Landscape Painting." Of the notes of these lectures, which Leslie has preserved, the following passages are particularly significant, and helpful to the understanding of the painter's mind and art :

"The attempt to revive styles that have existed in former ages

TREES NEAR HAMPSTEAD CHURCH

In the Tate Gallery



may for a time appear to be successful, but experience may now surely teach us its impossibility. I might put on a suit of Claude Lorraine's clothes and walk into the street, and the many who know Claude but slightly would pull off their hats to me, but I should at last meet with some one more intimately acquainted with him, who would expose me to the contempt I merited. . . .

"The young painter who, regardless of present popularity, would leave a name behind him must become the patient pupil of Nature. If we refer to the lives of all who have distinguished themselves in art or science, we shall find they have always been laborious. The landscape painter must walk in the fields with a humble mind. No arrogant man was ever permitted to see Nature in all her beauty. . . .

"Paley observed of himself, that 'the happiest hours of a sufficiently happy life were passed by the side of a stream'; and I am greatly mistaken if every landscape painter will not acknowledge that his most serene hours have been spent in the open air, with his palette on his hand."

In the autumn of 1836 Constable was much occupied with his children; John, the eldest, was preparing for Cambridge, and Charles, his second son, who had adopted the sea as his profession, was on leave prior to sailing in an East Indiaman. Early in the New Year he resumed working on "Arundel Mill and Castle," a subject, as he told Mr. George Constable in a letter dated February 17, 1837, "for which I am indebted to your friendship. It is, and shall be, my best picture; the size, three or four feet; it is safe for the Exhibition, as we have as much as six weeks good."

Alas ! "Man proposes . . ." The picture was never finished,

though Lucas subsequently executed an engraving from it for his second series of mezzotints, and "Arundel Mill and Castle" was considered to be sufficiently far advanced to be exhibited in the Academy after the painter's death.

His faithful friend and biographer, C. R. Leslie, saw Constable for the last time on Thursday, March 30th, when both attended a general assembly of the Academy and afterwards walked part of the way home together. "The night, though very cold, was fine," says Leslie, and he recalls an incident of the walk which throws its own light on Constable's character: "As we proceeded along Oxford Street, he heard a child cry on the opposite side of the way; the griefs of childhood never failed to arrest his attention, and he crossed over to a little beggar-girl who had hurt her knee; he gave her a shilling and some kind words, which, by stopping her tears, showed that the hurt was not very serious, and we continued our walk."

All the next day he stayed in, busily engaged on his picture of "Arundel Mill and Castle," but in the evening he went out on a charitable mission connected with the Artists' Benevolent Fund.

"He returned about nine o'clock, ate a hearty supper, and, feeling chilly, had his bed warmed: a luxury he rarely indulged in. It was his custom to read in bed; between ten and eleven he had read himself to sleep, and his candle, as usual, was removed by a servant. Soon after this, his eldest son, who had been at the theatre, returned home, and while preparing for bed in the next room, his father awoke in great pain and called to him. So little was Constable alarmed, however, that he at first refused to send for medical assistance; he took some

rhubarb and magnesia, which produced sickness, and he drank copiously of warm water, which occasioned vomiting; but the pain increasing, he desired that Mr. Michele, his near neighbour, should be sent for, who very soon attended. In the meantime, Constable had fainted, his son supposing he had fallen asleep; Mr. Michele instantly ordered some brandy to be brought; the bedroom of the patient was at the top of the house; the servant had to run downstairs for it, and before it could be procured, life was extinct, and within half an hour of the first attack of pain."

Thus Leslie chronicles the end of the friend and master he revered. A post-mortem, conducted by Professor Partridge in the presence of Mr. Michele and Mr. George Young, revealed the strange fact that Constable's death was due to acute indigestion; no traces of disease could be discovered sufficient to produce a fatal result. Mr. Michele was of opinion afterwards that the prompt application of a stimulant might have saved his patient's life. The great painter was laid to rest in the churchyard at Hampstead, a place he loved dearly, and ten years earlier, on first moving into his house there, he had written to Fisher, "I could gladly exclaim, here let me take my everlasting rest."

CHAPTER IV

WORK AND INFLUENCE

IT is a thousand pities that John Ruskin, who spent so large a part of his life in defending the art of J. M. W. Turner, should have been singularly blind to the genius of John Constable. One would have thought that the trees in "The Cenotaph" alone might have restrained the critic from rashly asserting "I have never seen any work of his in which there were any signs of his being able to draw, and hence even the most necessary details are painted by him inefficiently." In fairness to the writer, we ought to remember that this passage in his "Modern Painters" was published soon after Constable's death, when a vast number of Constable's paintings and sketches, with which we are familiar, were in private hands, and had probably not been seen by Ruskin. We may attribute his sweeping and quite unjustifiable condemnation, therefore, not merely to prejudice, but also to ignorance. To look at such a picture as "Trees near Hampstead Church" (see illustration) is surely to have any doubts as to the artist's ability to draw resolved at once, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum there are more than a dozen tree studies which prove that Constable had as searching an eye for form as for colour. In this brief survey of the life and work of the great landscape painter it has only been possible to mention individually a few of his most important paintings, but it is a literal truth that many of

Constable's slight sketches are, artistically, quite as important as any of his largest paintings, and of a certainty it can be said that nobody knows Constable who knows only his paintings, and not his sketches. Some of the most precious things he ever did are only about the size of the lid of a cigar-box. There are some beautiful little oil-sketches of this size in the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House; and, on the whole, it may be asserted that the colour in the sketches is fresher and has suffered less from the ravages of time than that in the larger paintings. It is partly for this reason, because they are fresher and because, inevitably, they are more spontaneous and easy, that many artists and many shrewd judges of painting have not hesitated to affirm that they prefer Constable's sketches to his finished pictures.

Constable's insistence on his being a "natural" painter has led many of his admirers and imitators astray, for it has led them to believe that some of his most characteristic works are just "snapshots from Nature." Undoubtedly Constable aimed at truth, all the truth that he could grasp and express, but he did not sacrifice all the many other qualities which a picture should possess to this one pursuit. His pictures indeed have the appearance of truth, but when examining more closely "The Leaping Horse" and "The Valley Farm" we have seen how carefully the parts have been arranged and ordered to form a harmonious and decorative whole. Much less than justice has been done to Constable as a designer, chiefly because he did not compel all Nature to fit into a preconceived geometrical arrangement, but extracted his designs from the manifold patterns which Nature herself affords to a diligent observer.

In his desire to give a true general impression of Nature, Constable was, within his limits, an impressionist; but in his day the scientific investigation of colour had not been carried so far as it was fifty years later, and the colour of shadows was not an inquiry which he pursued as did his successors, those great French painters of the nineteenth century known as the Impressionist School. It was the peculiar merit and glory of Constable that he searched out and stated fearlessly the colour in Nature's *lights*; in this he was a true pioneer and pointed out the way to succeeding generations. Not only do the facts of history altogether justify the statement that "in England, the influence of Constable on his successors has been wider than that of any other English landscape painter"; we can go still further and say that Constable is one of the very few British artists who have attained to international rank and been a world influence. No other British painter—not even Turner himself—is more honoured to-day in France and on the Continent generally than Constable. Talk to any Parisian artist about British painting and the name of John Constable will be the first to leap to his lips. The influence of the Suffolk miller's son first showed itself in Paris, and it has remained a potent force there ever since.

That the French Romanticists and Impressionists were both indebted to Constable is one of the commonplaces of art criticism, but my friend Mr. S. C. K. Smith, in his "Looking at Pictures," has made some shrewd observations on a point in which the former differed from Constable.

"If it is to France that we owe the first appreciation by artists of the work of Constable," he writes, "it is because they

grasped, not so much the love of Nature which inspired it, as the possibilities of landscape as a medium of individual expression. For landscape has to them no marked personality of its own, and for that very reason can be treated by the artist as the unclouded mirror of his own personality, as he sees it himself. Constable talks to you about the joy of rain among the trees. The painters of the Barbizon School talk to you each about himself. Their painting is not unconsciously, but consciously, temperamental. It is not so much himself, as his ideal of himself that the French painter puts into his picture, the abstract quality for which he feels the most sympathy."

In this there is much truth. Constable was different, his sympathies were given to the concrete rather than to the abstract, and for him not only was Suffolk Suffolk and Wiltshire Wiltshire, but every stump, stile, lane, and field in his beloved East Bergholt had a marked personality of its own. He was a painter who did not seek to save his own personality, and therefore did not lose it when he became absorbed in Nature. No painting is really more personal than his; we can all recognize the touch of Constable, but the expression of his own personality is unconscious, not deliberate. In his art, as in his life, John Constable was self-forgetful, and he became one of the greatest of the world's landscape artists because he was one of the most disinterested of painters.

The learned Director of the National Gallery has usefully reminded us that we must not press too far our claims concerning Constable's influence on French painting, pointing out that in 1824 Rousseau, "the pioneer of landscape painting in France," was then only twelve years old, that Corot's work

“retained its pleasant youthful stiffness for years after Constable’s death,” and that French painters in general would have had “nothing but the memory of a few works of Constable’s shown at the Salon to direct their sympathetic enthusiasm.” I am not sure but that Sir C. J. Holmes has under-estimated the number of Constable’s paintings which were to be seen in Paris during the early half of the last century, for we know from Leslie that several Frenchmen were among his patrons towards the latter end of his life, and it is possible that some of these pictures were known to and studied by the younger French landscape painters. Nevertheless, if it be true, as Sir C. J. Holmes asserts, that “it is as a tradition rather than as a reality that his influence has persisted,” this only amounts to saying that Constable’s attitude towards Nature has made an even greater impression on the world than his renderings of her scenery. This indeed is tacitly admitted by the writer when he says that Constable’s connexion with the moderns “rests on the sincerity with which he looked at Nature, a sincerity which only a few years ago was commonly regarded as the one thing needful to great art. And of this sincerity Constable was the conspicuous champion. Turner was sincere to himself rather than to Nature. Crome was sincere to Nature, but never allowed his sincerity to overrule his innate reverence for fine painting. Cox and De Wint were sincere, but their outlook was less wide, their truthfulness less unrelenting than Constable’s. So it has come about that Constable is generally held to be the father of modern landscape, both in France and England.”

In this matter of paternity, however, we must not forget that

before Constable there was Richard Wilson, whose art the later painter so greatly admired. In a letter dated 1823, Constable wrote : "I went to the gallery of Sir John Leicester to see the English artists. I recollect nothing so much as a large solemn, bright, warm, fresh landscape by Wilson, which still swims in my brain like a delicious dream. Poor Wilson. Think of his fate, think of his magnificence. . . . He was one of those appointed to show the world the hidden stores and beauties of Nature."

But Wilson, whose art even to-day is underrated and much misunderstood, is known chiefly by his Italian landscapes, though he was really the first to show the world the supreme beauty of English scenery. No doubt Constable knew Wilson's English landscapes and loved them, but somehow, though he was a real pioneer in this direction, attention always has been and still is directed to Wilson's Italian subjects rather than to his English scenes. The very fact that he never painted outside his own homeland has contributed to make Constable pre-eminent as *the* painter of the English countryside.

Again, it has been said that Constable's "first desire was to reproduce God's light in his work, and to give a true and full impression of Nature both in colour and chiaroscuro." This is true enough, but it is not true only of Constable. Wilson also aimed at giving Nature's true colouring and was not afraid to portray her in her green livery, as all who know his "Thames at Twickenham" and "View near Oxford" will agree. Wilson also, and Claude before him, strived above all things to reproduce "God's light" in their pictures; but there is this profound difference in their lighting that, while with Claude and Wilson

light was something still, steady, and glowing, with Constable it was something alive, quivering, and vibrating. This was one of the supreme distinctions of his art, and Sir James D. Linton penetrated to one of the secrets of the painter when he emphasized the fact that Constable "never failed to reproduce those exquisite flickering lights caused by the day sky which fall upon all objects in the open air."*

Let us be quite candid. In the matter of formal dignity it may be maintained that Constable did not reach to the heights attained by Claude and by Wilson, but—largely thanks to the presence of those "exquisite flickering lights"—his landscapes had another quality, an air of vivacity and vitality that had never before to the same degree been expressed in landscape painting. Before Constable the world had landscapes that were solemn, noble, dignified, and reposeful; but Constable was the founder of a new type of landscape that was not necessarily reposeful, but exhilarating and invigorating like the English breezes that swept across the meadows and through the foliage which he excelled in painting. Many painters have extracted art from life; Constable was one of the rare few who gave life to art.

THE END

* "Constable's Sketches," by Sir James D. Linton.

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